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ABSTRACT

A cultural component has been used in one instructor's literature classes at Georgia Perimeter College as a response to Expected Educational Outcome 4 which states: "The students will be exposed to and/or participate in cultural activities, events, and presentations," and to General Education Outcome 3 which states: "The students learn to make informed judgments beyond mere interpretation and summary." This paper features an assignment which responds to these outcomes. The paper states that the idea behind the assignment is to have students develop their critical thinking skills by doing comparison/contrast and by finding connections between what they think of as disparate elements. It explains that, for the assignment, each student will satisfy the course's cultural/oral component by attending a cultural activity outside of the class. And it further explains that the assignment has both oral and written segments--the oral segment takes the form of a 5-10 minute presentation in front of the class to share insights, cultural impressions, etc., while the written segment should be typed, double-spaced with one inch margins. According to the paper, the focus of the assignment is a critique of the cultural activity and a discussion of the activity in the context of its cultural milieu. The paper describes some of the presentations which were given in the class. It notes that the assignment can be "tweaked" to satisfy many criteria and at levels from the advanced degree to high school, and that it can be research based or field trip based. (NKA)

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Diversifying the Literature Curriculum Through a Cultural Component.

by Jeanette Gibson-Allen

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Diversifying the Literature Curriculum Through a Cultural Component

Paper Presented at the NCTE Conference

Baltimore, MD, November16, 2001

The cultural component has been a requirement in my literature classes since 1991. It is used as a response to Expected Educational Outcome 4 which states: "The students will be exposed to and/or participate in cultural activities, events, and presentation," and General Education Outcome 3 which states: "The students learn to make informed judgments beyond mere interpretation and summary." Aside from meeting these requirements, this exercise is very useful in getting students to venture out of their own little worlds and explore the wider world. They also have the opportunity to share information with their peers and glean information from them.

The idea behind the assignment is to have students develop their critical thinking skills by doing comparison/contrast and by finding connections between what they think of as disparate elements. This is especially important because many students do not think of connecting other cultures with their own. Connections are one of the most important elements of the cultural exercise they do.

When students are first given the assignment, the more adventurous ones see it as a challenge, while the timid ones express trepidation at the very thought of doing something so different. Consequently, they are introduced to the assignment on the first day of the semester, and receive the specifics, a week or two later. This gives them an opportunity to begin thinking of what they are going to do. Sometimes the class as a whole gets a copy of *Creative Loafing* or a program schedule from the Fine Arts Department to find a suitable presentation.

Some students share information about cultural activities with their peers. They begin to work together on this assignment.

The Assignment

Each student will satisfy the course's cultural/oral component by attending a cultural activity outside of the class. Such activities may include a public reading by an artist, a stage performance, a lecture, a video, or a visit to a site. A research based cultural component may also be used.

Format Guidelines:

This assignment has two segments: an oral one and a written one. The oral one will take the form of a five to ten minute presentation in front of the class to share insights, cultural information, and impressions with peers. It may be an individual or group presentation. If it is a group presentation, each member of the group will be evaluated individually, and will be given as much time as an individual presenter. The written component should be typed, double-spaced with one-inch margins on the sides and bottom. Plain white paper and black ink are standard.

PART I: CRITIQUE OF ACTIVITY

Lecture/Reading: What was the presenter's central focus? Discuss. Provide highlights of the content. Evaluate the content in terms of strengths or weaknesses. Be specific.
Performance: Provide a brief plot summary. What was the essential message/purpose/function of the performance? Discuss. Critique particular characters or aspects of the performance that stood out—that were particularly well or poorly dramatized. What were strengths or weaknesses of the performance?
Research Based Component: Provide a rational for selecting this type of component. Provide a brief summary of the content. What was the essential focus? Discuss. What are the lessons to be drawn from this presentation?

PART II: APPLICATION

Discuss the activity in the context of its cultural milieu. What insights were gained into a particular work, author, literary period, or culture from which the work emerged?

Length: 400-500 words

Grade: Since various students will be selecting different cultural events, no comparative judgment will be made about the event itself. The grade will be based not on the choice of activity, but on the student's discussion of it. This component will count toward 20% of your grade.

Initially, the assignment was written, but some students had such good and informative responses that they were encouraged to share them. Now the assignment has two components. The oral part receives two grades: one from the professor, and the other from

their peers. Both of these grades weigh equally. The written component is treated as a short, formal paper and students follow MLA style in completing their papers. The written segment receives one grade from the professor. The specifics of this assignment can be changed very easily to satisfy different criteria. Any of the specifics of the assignment may be changed to accommodate the level of the students, the requirements of the class, or the expectations of the instructor. When the class is large, students work in groups of three or four and submit individual or group papers depending on my preference. Students do better when they have to share information with their peers. Combining the two assignments saves time, helps students to interact with one another, and encourages presentations of a better quality. I have used the cultural component in all five of my literature classes: World Literature I, World Literature II, British Literature I, American Literature I, and American Literature II.

Student responses are varied and creative. The following are a few of them. One student decided that she was going to do her presentation on Hinduism and learn as much as she could by visiting a Hindu temple in Atlanta. She called the temple and explained her mission. She was very warmly accepted and given a date to visit the temple. She took along a girlfriend for moral support. She had to be with the women in a different part of the temple and that seemed to make her very uncomfortable. Before she entered, she had to remove her shoes. After she did this, she went into the room and observed the rituals the women were performing. She suddenly realized that a bug on the floor was crawling in her direction. She instinctively killed it. There was a gasp followed by a shocked silence. One of the older women explained to her that all life was sacrosanct. She was so embarrassed that she left shortly after. After her presentation, the class discussed the consequences of breaking the rules in a community. This visit turned out to be quite a learning experience for her. She realized

just how unreceptive she is to anything different. She confessed that she was discomfited rather than intrigued by the differences. She found the women to be rather subservient. We connected this to the Sita Syndrome.

About four students from a World Literature I class went to see a presentation of *Hamlet* at the Shakespeare Tavern. One of the students said that he enjoyed the drama because other members of the class were there. He commented on the fact that both *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex* are tragedies. He concluded that both Shakespeare and the Greek dramatists seemed to regard tragedy as a higher type of dramatic expression and stressed the same themes, betrayal, arrogance, family dysfunction, and misconception. Both plays "touch our lives and present questions about living and dying, truth and honor, art and nature, and our responsibilities to one another as well as to our state. *Hamlet* is not an epic tragedy like *Oedipus* I, but a tragedy of revenge."

Another student described *Hamlet* as the definitive tragedy. It is obviously based on the Greek model, but takes the tragedy one step beyond its previous form. Shakespeare modernized the form. Instead of determinism and prophecy, *Hamlet* relies on choice and free will which cause a situation that is no less tragic because of them. She established connections between Hamlet and Oedipus—both of them seemed oblivious to their part in the tragic events that took place around them. She further stated, "Tragedy is something that, while obviously a sad commentary on humanity, is also beautiful. It isn't so much the outcome, but the struggle that is important."

Another student in an American Literature II class, decided to do a research based presentation on *Beloved.* She had used this text for her research paper and obtained permission to use it for her cultural component. She presented some very interesting information on

African-American history. She first told the class that the story was based on an actual happening. She next showed vignettes from the video and referred to the incidents as learning experiences for her. The book helped her to appreciate the brutality of slavery and the dire circumstances in which slaves found themselves. She spoke specifically about the White males who stole Sethe's milk, making it impossible for her to feed her baby. She saw this as the ultimate injury. It helped her to appreciate the role spirituality played in the lives of the slaves. According to her: "They had to believe in spirituality because they had no material resources.

Researching this presentation helped her to understand some of the anger expressed by African-American writers. She never knew that people had lived such brutal lives. For her, the novel ends on an optimistic note because the reader realizes the strength and endurance of the human spirit and the lengths to which love of her children will drive a mother.

Another research based presentation was done by a female student in American Literature I. Her title was "Achievements Made by Early American Women." This student used a poster board to mount her presentation. She divided the women into three categories: Slave Women, Colonial Women, Native American Women. Under Slave Women, she listed Phyllis Wheatley, 1753-1784 (poet); Lucretia Coffin Mott, 1793-1880 (anti-slavery and women's rights advocate); and Catherine Fergurson, 1779-1854 (founder of NY City's first Sunday School). Under Colonial Women, she listed Molly Pitcher, 1754-1832 (Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley, heroine of the Revolutionary War); Dorothea Payne Todd Madison, 1772-1849 (First Lady); and Catherine Sedgwick, 1784-1876. Under Native American Women, she listed Emily Pauline Johnson, 1784-1867 (poet) and Sacagawea. Her biographical dates were not provided. On the bulletin board, the student had a picture of each heroine and a short bio.

Her argument was that these women were united across color and economic barriers. In spite of their obstacles, each of them distinguished herself and became an American heroine. She saw this as an indication of the commonalities that all American women share. They were all aware of the future and enriched those who came after them. Her subtitle was, "They Always Thought of Others."

One student visited a monastery, Monastery of the Holy Spirit, in Conyers, GA, not very far from the college. He described the way in which members of this self-contained community lived. He informed us of the fact that some members of the community had taken a vow of silence. He spoke about the beauty and tranquility of the surroundings and of the fact that the monks did everything for themselves. He shared with us the one-page visitor's guide that states, "The form of religious life led here, 'monasticism,' goes back to the early centuries of Christian history." The student explained that his visit to the monastery gave him a clearer understanding of the type of life led by many of the characters from Chaucer's *Prologue*, and of the religious aspirations of such people as Marjorie Kempe, and Julian of Norwich, the anchoress. Many of his peers were fascinated that in the year 2001, people led such lives.

The above are just a few of the many oral and cultural presentations that students in my literature classes have made. It is evident that the cultural component can be tweaked to satisfy many criteria. It can be used as a writing assignment, as an oral presentation, as a critical thinking tool, as a peer evaluation tool, as a way of covering content, as a method of developing listening skills, as a way of getting students to be creative. In short, it is very flexible. It can be used at levels ranging from the advanced degree to high school. It can be research based or field trip based. It can be an in-class assignment of an out-of-class

assignment. The possibilities are determined by you, the instructor. Students love it because it makes learning relevant and comes alive as never before.

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D.30 Panel/Rainbow Strand

DIVERSE APPROACHES TO TEACHING DIVERSE LITERASTURES: BLUES, MYTH, AND IDEOLOGY (S-T-C)

Third Presenter